

Hymns of the Faith: “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”

Isaiah 53

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.”... Here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Ligon Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you. And good morning, Bill Wymond, and good morning to you, Derek Thomas. Delighted to be with both of you dear brothers for “Hymns of the Faith,” and today we have a powerhouse hymn that we are going to be studying. Not only is the text and the music to this hymn profound and deeply moving; this hymn features a team of author/composer, translator/arranger like very few hymns in all of hymnody.

Some of you who are pop music aficionados may remember back in the 1980's the rise of what were called “the super-groups,” where certain members of a famous pop group would join up, team up, with several other famous members and form a super-group. Well, let me tell you, the author/composer/translators and arranger of this particular hymn ... [*laughs*]...they compose an amazing super-group of people! Bernard of Clairvaux (from the eleventh and early twelfth century), Paul Gerhardt (from the seventeenth century), and J. W. Alexander (from the early nineteenth century) give us the text which is *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*. The tune — those of you who love sacred choral music, you're going to immediately recognize it as the PASSION CHORALE, as a part of a very, very famous piece of music composed by one of the greatest composers of all time, anywhere in any culture, and certainly one of the finest Christian sacred choral composers ever, Johann Sebastian Bach. And Bill Wymond's going to talk about this. But the tune I think comes from Hans Leo Hassler, and he in his own right was an amazing composer. I've had the privilege of singing some of his compositions. Bill will tell us about this in a moment, but before we even get started on this, Bill, I think we need to hear this glorious, glorious chorale tune to *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*. [Dr. Wymond plays.]

Dr. Duncan: Not only do you have a text that focuses on one of those pinnacle

doctrines of Scripture on the atoning work of Christ and reflecting out of that majestic passage in Isaiah 53, but you have a text that comes to us from Bernard of Clairvaux (translated by Paul Gerhardt in the seventeenth century, and then again by J. W. Alexander, the great Princetonian in the nineteenth century), you've got this music by Hans Leo Hassler, and you've got it arranged by Johann Sebastian Bach. It's in one of the great chorale pieces.

It all converges...it's almost a picture of what it's going to be like in heaven! Can you imagine in heaven, Derek, when certain of these stellar servants of the Lord from over the ages are commissioned to come together? Maybe there's going to be a preaching service when the five greatest preachers of all times are given the text of Isaiah 53, and on one Lord's Day morning in heaven they're going to proclaim the word of God from that passage...and our minds are going to be blown as we reflect upon the Mediator with whom we are standing and praising? It's almost like you get a foretaste of it in this hymn.

Tell us, Derek, just a little bit about this Bernard of Clairvaux, whom John Calvin was pretty high on. John Calvin really thought highly of this medieval monk.

Dr. Thomas: He did indeed, and of course that would be somewhat surprising if you didn't know that, because Bernard of Clairvaux of course was a monk and therefore Roman Catholic, and a member of the Cistercian Order, I think. In Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his *magnum opus* that he worked on all of his life and is still utilized today as a textbook for seminary students...or at least should be, there are more quotations of Bernard of Clairvaux than any other (apart possibly than from Augustine), which is a very surprising fact. He was called the honey-tongued doctor...twelfth century. There is some debate as to whether this is from Bernard of Clairvaux...of course we don't have any solid evidence of that. The evidence stems from the fourteenth century, which is a good bit away from the twelfth century.

Bernard of Clairvaux was the man who wrote the code of ethics for the Templars, the Knights Templar. He wrote the ethics code for it; believed in militarily defending the Holy Land from...

Dr. Duncan: Preached the Crusades...was it the Second Crusades that he preached, or was it the first Crusade? I can't remember. He was early on very, very influential in getting Christian princes to defend the Holy Land from the infidel (by which he of course meant Muslims).

Dr. Thomas: Yes, and like Augustine was profoundly influenced by his mother...has this mystical strain...I think it's correct to call it "pietistic." He has this mystical strain in him. His two great pieces of literature are one on the love of God, which Calvin quotes a good bit, and then a lengthy series of sermons on The Song of Solomon, which only tangentially refers to the text.

Dr. Duncan: And, boy, is there a long Christian history of that! *[Laughs]*

Dr. Thomas: And some would argue that his interpretation of The Song of Solomon influenced Puritan interpretation of it.

Dr. Duncan: Yes. Even Beza, and others.

Dr. Thomas: So he was on the side of the angels in part on the atonement. He fell out with Peter Abelard, a very prominent theologian of his time, because Abelard had suggested that Jesus had died merely as an example of love, and successfully had Abelard condemned — or at least his views condemned — by Pope...I'm not sure who the Pope was at the time. But still, Bernard of Clairvaux is read with some profit for his piety, but it is a mystical kind of piety and it's still somewhat strange to me that Calvin loved him so much...I think grew in love with him. I think the young Calvin was a little more critical, but I think the late Calvin was almost without criticism in his quotations.

Dr. Duncan: And Derek, whether this piece originates with Bernard or not, it is picked up and re-translated by Paul Gerhardt, who will be familiar to some people who love Lutheran and English-speaking hymnody that has roots in Germany. What about Paul Gerhardt?

Dr. Thomas: From the sixteenth century, and was involved in the so-called Thirty Years' War in Germany...fell out with [now help me here, Ligon] King Wilhelm I, is it? Wilhelm, I think, tried to introduce an enforced ecumenical policy of no criticism between Lutherans and the Reformed churches, and Paul Gerhardt couldn't comply with that and was ostracized for a short period of time...I think was unemployed for a time because of that. Today he's probably in German hymnody as well-known as Luther himself, I guess. Probably he translated this. Whether it is a Bernard of Clairvaux original, I think that the Princetonian gets the laurel wreath here for the translation. J. W. Alexander's translation of this is quite, quite stunning, even in the opening line: "O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down."

Dr. Duncan: And tell them who J. W. Alexander is. I mean, as Gerhardt is a famous Lutheran, you couldn't find a much more famous nineteenth century American Presbyterian than J. W. Alexander.

Dr. Thomas: Yes! I think I'm going to hand that over to you—James Waddell Alexander!

Dr. Duncan: Well, many people will recognize the name Alexander as in Alexander Hall in Princeton. And for Presbyterians, Princeton in the United States once upon a time had a role somewhat akin to Mecca, or at least to Edinburgh for Presbyterians in Scotland or in Britain, or in general. And J. W. Alexander was one of the two ministers most influential in the founding of

Princeton, and was a very, very famous...I think he was at Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He and Samuel Miller become very, very instrumental in the formation of this great institution, and the Alexander family was sort of regal in Presbyterianism.

Dr. Thomas: He ended, after being Professor of Church History and Church Government, I think, in Princeton, at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. Is that still there?

Dr. Duncan: Yes, it is...and is that where our organ is now? Or is our organ somewhere else? Our organ console, I should say.

Dr. Wymond: It's actually somewhere else, but Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church is still going strong there, and they've had some very famous preachers along the way: James S. Stewart... was he not there? I think so. And several others, so it's right there in a prominent place on Fifth Avenue.

Dr. Duncan: So you have this amazing team of authors and translators of the hymn, and you're saying, Derek, that it's Alexander who puts it in the form that we're used to singing it in the English language. Was this hymn sung in Wales? In England? And in Northern Ireland, when you were there?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, although I notice that in a compendium of English hymns, a fairly modern one by Timothy Dudley Smith, it does not appear for some strange reason...I certainly have always known this, and I think because I have always known the music which Bill's going to talk about, and Bach's use of this tune in *The St. Matthew Passion*, which must be the greatest piece of sacred music ever, ever written, I think...at least that would be my humble opinion, but the Maestro himself will speak to the...

Dr. Duncan: Yes, and we really do need to spend some time on the tune and on the arrangement itself, Bill, because it's remarkable. It's got all the pathos and power of German sacred music in it.

Dr. Thomas: I was speaking to a friend of mine with whom I share a love for classical music, and we've been friends for fifty years. He was trying to explain to me — and he knows more about music, the actual theory of music, than I do — about how Bach's theology is so profoundly wrapped into his music; that he understands the theology behind the text, so in cantatas, for example, the music isn't just composed because it's a nice tune. It's actually composed at every level with a deep understanding of the text.

Dr. Duncan: Right. Bill, tell us a little bit about the PASSION CHORALE, this beautiful tune, the arrangers...the composers.

Dr. Wymond: Well, this tune was a favorite of Bach's. I think he used it more

than any of the other chorale tunes, and it's also said to have been a favorite of Mozart's. Both of them are said to have said that if they could have composed this tune, that would have been their greatest feat. And the tune is a moving thing, emotionally. I'm just going to play a little bit of it again... [plays]... there's emotion wrapped in that musically.

I think the fact that it descends, rather than ascends, [plays]... you just asked me what key it is in...and that's in A minor. Minor keys are more serious than major keys, and a minor key comes about because you change a couple of notes in the scale. A major scale in A would be... [plays]. That last note there makes a huge difference. There are different kinds of minors, but this minor... [plays]...that's one minor; and just changing a couple of notes makes the tunes have a more melancholy sound.

Dr. Thomas: It's always fascinated me how notes, which you can describe mathematically in terms of the sequence of notes, but how a certain key — in this case a minor key — can immediately bring about feelings of great sadness and sorrow. I know we associate the tune now with *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*, but even if you had never known what this was about, what this tune was set to, you'd immediately think this is something deeply sorrowful.

Dr. Wymond: I think so. There are the two distinctions: one is major-minor...major keys or minor keys for a hymn; and then there is the whole other question of the key in which a hymn is written. Certain keys, or certain notes of the scale upon which a song will be built, will be brighter or darker, according to what that...

Dr. Thomas: Right! And you know...and understandably so, but in some smaller churches where musicians aren't plentiful, they often change keys because they can't play certain keys because there are too many sharps or flats or something. And then something happens. It's no longer fitting to what's being sung! At least in my opinion...

Dr. Wymond: Well, I think about that. I do actually here change some keys, but I'm careful about that. If the hymn is a bright hymn, then I try to go to a lower bright key; or, if it's a darker theme and a darker tune, then I'll go to a darker sound, because the ancient Greeks made much of the fact that the scales would affect your emotions very much.

In fact, they thought as part of their educational system that they had to avoid certain scales and certain keys because they thought that they would corrupt their youth! And they put a lot of weight on the emotional aspects, didn't they?

But anyway, this song is in a minor key, to be sure, and it just has not only the emotion that comes from the minor key and the descending line...[plays], but then these intervals like this...[plays]...there's a kind of a pleading in that. Just

that little turn of phrase right there is pleading.

Well, I don't want to spend too much time talking about that, but you find this effect all the way through this tune, which, as I said, everybody just thought was a great tune.

What I think is interesting about this tune is that it started off actually as a love song. Hassler himself borrowed this from the popular songs of the day, and there are different texts associated with it as a popular tune. But one of them was *O Innsbruck, I Hate to Leave Thee*. So some ballad singer is talking about the fact that he's having to leave a town...you know, it's an *I Left My Heart in San Francisco* sort of thing.

Dr. Duncan: Or *Danny Boy*, with you know...

Dr. Wymond: Yes, exactly the same thing! Well, when it was that tune, it had slightly different rhythm... [plays]...a Renaissance...

Dr. Duncan: One of those “dance-y” kind of German sounds that we've talked about before. That is fascinating.

Dr. Wymond: Yes, Renaissance rhythm right there. Hassler himself was born in Nuremberg, Germany, just after the turn of the 1600's, in 1601. He was appreciated very much as a musician. He later worked in Bavaria. His father, Isaac Hassler, was a very important organist in Nuremberg. In the obituary of his father it says,

“He carefully brought up and trained his son, Hans Leo, in the fear of God and in the free arts, especially the praiseworthy art of music.”

So this father gave attention to rearing his children. And you know if parents do that, their children often like music!

Dr. Duncan: Absolutely!

Dr. Wymond: Not just piano lessons, but other sorts of things, too. Hassler went to Venice, which was a destination for young Germans who wanted to learn the best of music, because the arts were highly developed there in Venice. When he returned back to Germany, he was an organist in Augsburg for a good while, and then after his patron there died, he went to Dresden. By the time he got to Dresden, his health had declined and so he was not as fruitful as he was earlier; and he died. You know lives were sort of short back in those days. But thankfully, he took this tune and he put it in a sacred form by changing the rhythm a little bit and also by putting a set of Christian words to it, and it's become this beloved work which Bach just thought was the best thing he could use in *The St. Matthew Passion*, and he used it five times.

A “passion” takes the narrative of the death of Christ, and in Bach's method and other methods too, they would insert hymn tunes or chorale tunes to give the reflection of the author or of the observer to what was happening at the time to Jesus. And it's interesting to me that as Bach uses this tune he changes the key according to the emotion that he is trying to put forth.

When he first starts, he starts in a kind of a high key [*plays*], and that comes early in the narrative of Christ, just before Peter's denial. Then later, after Christ is in trial and they are talking about whether to release Barabbas or not, the tune is more thoughtful [*plays*]...a lower key.

And then just before the Way of the Cross, when Christ has to bear the cross, the tune comes in yet another key [*plays*]. It's a higher key there, and I think the intent is probably just to have a heightened emotional reflection. Well, I could go on and on and on, but it's a marvelous thing to see how Bach used it.

And I think it's interesting that this in the original was a 50-line poem in the Latin, and then it became a 24-line poem later as it was used in the English translation.

Dr. Duncan: And in our English today we typically sing three stanzas of it. We sing it, Bill, very often at Communion services, and it's so appropriate when reflecting on the person and work of Christ.

Dr. Wymond: And it takes this literary device and it talks about the head and lets that represent the whole, but in the original there were seven different body parts that were talked about. It talked about the hands, the head, the feet, the wounds, and so on like that, and I thought that was an interesting literary device that it used. And we lose that a little bit, since we don't sing all the stanzas.

Dr. Duncan: And presumably the Lutherans may well have retained some of that, if they used it any for congregational singing. I guess the Reformed types, like J. W. Alexander, would have been less apt to meditate on the specific physicality of the person of Christ, Derek. Maybe that's why we have a shortened version from the hand of J.W. Alexander.

Dr. Thomas: Right, and possibly in its original had a crucifix in mind, the contemplation of Christ on the crucifix.

Dr. Wymond: And so, Derek, why do we not emphasize so much this physical suffering aspect as what is emphasized now? Not that it's not important...

Dr. Thomas: Yes....how would you answer that, Ligon?

Dr. Duncan: I think the way I'd start is by saying it's very interesting that the Gospel writers, at least two of whom were there, refused to tell us much about it.

You know, it is amazing, given the horror that crucifixion carried in the ancient world. If you've ever read Martin Hengel or the other descriptions historically of crucifixion, you know how the awfulness of that act struck terror in the hearts of contemporaries in the Roman world who had seen it. And yet, in all of the Gospels as Jesus' death is described for us, it is ...the Gospel writers are incredibly restrained in their drawing our attention to the physical suffering.

They want us to understand that Christ suffered physically, but it is clear to me that they want us to understand that even more than His physical suffering, that His bearing of our sins and His bearing of the Father's wrath was, if I can put it this way, even more important than the physical suffering that He endured. Because literally tens of thousands of people endured the physical suffering of Roman crosses, and we can contemplate people that suffered more and longer than Jesus physically. I mean, Jesus' death on a cross, for the typical time frame on a cross, is much quicker than a lot of people's death on the cross. But nobody ever bore the weight of sin on a cross but Jesus.

And again, the text of this song is just glorious:

“O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down;
Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, thine only crown;
O sacred Head, what glory, what bliss till now was Thine!
Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call Thee mine.”

Bill, let's hear this marvelous, marvelous hymn and tune.

[Vocal solo with organ:]

“O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down;
Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, thine only crown;
O sacred Head, what glory, what bliss till now was Thine!
Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call Thee mine.

“What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners' gain:
Mine, mine was the transgression, but Thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Savior! 'Tis I deserve Thy place;
Look on me with Thy favor, vouchsafe to me Thy grace.

“What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest Friend,
For this, Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine forever; and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to Thee.”

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